

THE RESETTLEMENT PROJECTS AS LABORATORIES FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
Address by Miss Molly Flynn at the annual meeting
of the Texas Agricultural Workers Association, at
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Scattered throughout nearly every state in the Union are 164 projects set up by the Farm Security Administration to give new hope and new homesteads to more than 14,000 farm people.

Some of these communities were set up for families stranded in worn-out farming areas, or in abandoned mining or lumbering towns. Some enabled farm tenants to own a farm and home of their own. Others were originally established by the Subsistence Homesteads Division of the Department of Interior for low-income industrial workers employed seasonally in large towns. Still others gave the sharecropper or tenant a chance to stay on a good farm over an uninterrupted period of five or more years.

When resettlement first started, the planners knew that it took more than new buildings to give homesteaders roots in a community. Today, when the stage of blueprints is over, we must map the social development of these rural centers. These rural centers are bringing together for the first time families used to the isolation of their own farms.

Just as two persons are never alike, each project has emerged with an individuality of its own from the initial stage of construction and resettlement of families. Though some may have the same type of buildings, the same basic economy, or much the same kind of people, the molds have all shaped differently.

Given a people used to organization, the development of a community life might have been simpler; but the families resettled on Farm Security Administration homesteads are for the most part former sharecroppers and tenant farmers, used to the decisions of others. Remaining together in the place where they were born, they took for granted that the boy would farm and the girl would marry a farmer. An apprenticeship on a farm seemed always available; they scorned the need for a formal education.

Jolting these families out of their accustomed living habits, the depression left them economically helpless and emotionally insecure. Many small farm owners hanging onto the fringe of ownership slipped down to the ranks of tenants. Many young couples starting to farm in the footsteps of their parents found that land was scarce and competition keen. The landslide of farm prices in 1933 wiped out any slim margin of security for many families. At least, one million farm families eventually went on relief.



To a few of these families, the FSA projects offered a new pattern of living for broader horizons, along with better living standards. In these communities, they found on the economic side of the ledger the means of producing and marketing farm projects; on the social side, opportunities for education of youth and adults, for group organization, religious worship, facilities for medical care, recreation, and a democratic self-government.

Effective group action, however, grows only out of the homesteaders' realization of their needs and problems. Yet nothing in their background had prepared them for this experience. Community managers and education advisers had to initiate the first few basic activities, such as group organizations, homesteaders' committees, and eventually community councils, or civic organizations.

There were many handicaps before a community consciousness could flourish. In the first place, the resettled families often came from different areas, different religious groups and were of various nationalities. On some of the western projects, the families had come from the Dust Bowl several hundred miles to an entirely new environment. Families on the Sam Houston Farms in Texas were of German, Bohemian, Polish, French, Italian, English, Scotch and Irish ancestry. Such diverging backgrounds made community effort difficult. Homesteaders did not know each other as friends or neighbors, as in the usual rural community. Many were accustomed to living and thinking as individual families rather than as members of a community. Not only did the family have to adjust itself to the rural community, but also to a new home and farm unit, and often, a new kind of farming.

There was an advantage, however, in their common problems. Approximately all families were of the same economic level and had to farm under similar conditions--at the Wichita Valley Farms, for example, irrigation farming; at Sam Houston Farms, the land had to be drained, and at Sabine Farms, homesteaders had to clear their land before farming it.

Community growth is best illustrated by what has actually happened on many homesteads. In one community, when the first group of families moved in, the manager casually suggested that two or three persons might get together to plan a Fourth of July celebration. A committee was formed for a picnic. The success of the picnic spurred the committee to discuss plans for holding church services. During the conversation with the community manager, the committee learned of another group of families moving to the project. Those present decided to have a welcoming committee call on the families to help them get settled. Other people were asked to act on committees for this or that purpose. Within the year these

groups saw the need for an all-community group where their questions and plans could be aired. The result was a homesteaders' association, with standing committees for education, health, recreation, and a newspaper. Some of the most effective work has been done by the Health Committee. It surveyed the need for medical care and analyzed the cost of medical care, according to families' ability to pay. It discussed a medical plan with Farm Security personnel and with the local medical association. Eventually, the Health Committee established a medical plan which works to the great advantage of every homestead family. Similar accomplishments could be cited for several of the other committees which grew out of the original informal picnic committee.

In another state, where 250 families were resettled on Farm Security land in a sparsely populated county, the out-of school youth had practically no social activities. The community manager, in conversation with two or three of these young people, suggested that it might be a good idea to get together representatives of the school group, some of the people in the nearby village, and several families from the project came to discuss the youth situation. The young people themselves called the group together to consider what might be done. The youth committee appointed began regular courses in music, drama, woodworking and electricity. The community house was opened one night a week for dances and entertainment, planned and conducted by the young people living in the vicinity.

Often, if fellow residents initiate a plan of activity, homesteaders are more willing to cooperate than if the program were suggested by supervisors. At one project, where homesteaders opposed the minimum budgets outlined by the home supervisor, a committee studied the needs of each family and worked out larger canning budgets with a greater variety of vegetables and fruits. The home supervisor served only in an advisory capacity, supplying the committee with bulletins and information. As a result of the committee's work, homesteaders accepted the increased budgets enthusiastically.

Sometimes, the group action that now characterizes these communities falls into political channels. On one project, homesteaders were dissatisfied with the condition of the county roads. Knowing their political power was slight because so few of them were registered to vote, they made a drive to pay their poll taxes. It was the first time in their lives that they were anxious for their section of the county to be represented.

No discussion of a community would be complete without mentioning the community buildings where homesteaders' varied social and educational activities are given full play. Designed to provide a

meeting-ground for business, social, educational and recreational activities, they include an auditorium, kitchen, library room, health clinic, work-shop, and, where necessary, classrooms. They represent, I believe, examples of outstanding rural buildings for multiple-use built at minimum cost.

The community center has not only fostered a definite community spirit but has helped to attract the farm families in neighboring areas to project activities. Situations like that described by one education adviser are becoming rare. She said, "At first, there was a feeling of apprehension and some jealousy on the part of the old residents toward the homesteaders and a rather aloof attitude on the part of some of the new community residents. The walls are gradually being broken down and the homesteaders have been making a steady effort to win the confidence of their neighbors."

The relation between this particular community and the surrounding area was cemented by many ties. Children from outside areas attended the schools on the project, and the Parent Teachers Associations had equal representation from both groups. Homesteaders joined the neighborhood churches, and outside church groups used the school auditorium for their festivities and suppers. No one was excluded from membership in such groups as the Scouts, home demonstration or drama clubs, study groups and nursery school. Athletic teams for older boys were made up of boys living on and outside the project. Health provisions such as school examinations, summer round-ups, immunization and vaccination, hot school lunches, books and adequate clothing were extended to all children, especially the disadvantaged from the neighboring area.

Meetings on FSA homesteads are usually swelled by the attendance of the outside group. In Burlington, North Dakota, for example, an adult education program was started on a community rather than a project basis. The idea for the program came from the homesteaders, but the whole community is developing it with the Superintendent of Schools as chairman of a committee composed of two members from the project and three from the outlying district.

Many projects have "Neighborhood Training Days" which are really short courses given over a period of three or four days for all who care to attend. Different topics such as "cooperative buying and selling", "hay production and storage", "how to plan and conduct meetings", and "first aid" are talked over by neighboring farm families and homesteaders.

On the whole, their community life is replacing many old ties, so that families are stimulated to build a new social life at the same time that they are evolving a new economy. They are realizing that the welfare of the community depends on the actions of the individuals that make up the community.

As a result of this experience with resettlement communities, social and educational activities have been encouraged in migratory labor camps established by the Farm Security Administration. The people in migrant camps have eagerly seized upon the technique of a community council. The Camp Council and its committees plans and manages the activities, and enforces regulations for the welfare of the camp. Recently, in one of our California camps, the council appointed a judiciary committee to deal with infractions of regulations within the camp. One of the first persons called before this committee was the camp manager, who had been reported for exceeding the ten-mile per hour limit. The manager appeared before the committee and gave a full explanation of the emergency nature of his violation. Welfare committees look after newcomers to the camps and provide them with food and clothing when necessary. At one migrant camp, the council of migrant residents has decided to send a boy and girl to college from the voluntary contributions of campers.

These new perspectives and patterns of rural living on FSA projects were planned in times of peace. The new defense plans under way for the Nation have made these rural centers strategic. While plans are being made to set up defense training centers to teach rural youth the first steps in a machinists' or carpenters' trade, few rural schools are equipped to meet this demand. Because the schools established in FSA communities are equipped with vocational shops, there will be no lag in setting up such a program. In one county with a high percentage of Negroes, the project school was the only high school in the county and the only school with shop equipment. Already, training centers have been established in nine states: four in Indiana, three in South Carolina, two in Alabama, three in Arkansas, one in Louisiana, three in Texas, one in Georgia, one in Michigan, and one in West Virginia.

Perhaps the greatest good to come out of the community program is the encouragement it is giving young people to find broader horizons. Now, that there is so little room in agriculture for more farm workers--it is estimated that the Nation's domestic and foreign needs could be supplied by 1,500,000 fewer farm workers than in 1929--the answer for rural youth is to seek other fields. I could recount many instances of the new hope for the children of farm families, as a result of the projects. Committees of homesteaders have worked out opportunities for their boys and girls to

go on to college or vocational schools. Not so long ago when I visited a Southern project, a group of five young people were leaving to go to another rural area to conduct the games and dances at a church meeting. They were the recreation committee for that area. Four years ago in that community, an FSA supervisor started a baseball team and the boys were read out of church because they were playing baseball. Now they are going to church gatherings to teach children games.

At Aberdeen Gardens, Virginia, seventeen young Negro girls in the past year have taken training in domestic work and every one of them has found employment.

In a word, the social and educational program has been designed and developed to care for the needs of these farm families. The community itself is the subject-matter with the people, both young and old, together with the teachers and supervisors are participants in striving for the goal of economic, educational and social rehabilitation.

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